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SACRED JOURNEY

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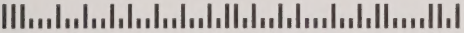

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Cover photo by Jaap Hart

Meet Fellowship in Prayer's New Managing Director

"How do you want to create peace, if there is no peace inside yourselves?"
~ Thich Nhat Hanh

In keeping with our tradition of devoting the December/January issue of SACRED JOURNEY *to peace, at all levels within ourselves and in our world, we feature writings by Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the world's most beloved spiritual leaders and peacemakers. The accompanying stories, poems, and prayers are also interlaced with themes of peace in its many forms. We hope they will touch your heart and offer you inspiraton and support on your own spiritual journey, especially at this time of year when holidays and family traditions can make life more stressful than usual. Re-centering oneself in peace can become a saving grace, not only at this particular time of year, and not only to oneself but to those around us, and ultimately, to our world.*

Please visit our web site in December and January (and every month) for more writings on peace and related themes (www.sacredjourney.org). We change our web site contents on the first of each month, and we add to the inspiraton of the written words by accompanying them with

photographs. As always, we welcome your comments, and we encourage you to send us your own personal story about your experience on a spiritual path.

Last month on November 6 Fellowship in Prayer welcomed Janet M. Haag as managing director of our non-profit organization. Below, please find her words of introduction. In future issues you'll find her regular "Message from the Director" in which she will keep you informed of Fellowship in Prayer's activities.

Janet Haag: Life is an adventure! We are never quite sure where we will end up or who we will meet along the way or what we will actually accomplish. We certainly set destinations, chart courses and make choices but there are elements of mystery and surprise that challenge our creativity and open us up to a whole new world of possibilities. I like to think that as I become the new managing director for Fellowship in Prayer, we are embarking on just such an adventure together.

My husband, who works in New York City, has observed that, "on the city's subway, one can meet the world." Several weeks ago, he ran into an acquaintance of Pakistani origin. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, he asked, "Jaspal, what do you think about what is happening in the world these days?" He responded thoughtfully, "we have big problems, very big problems—ones that cannot be solved by war . . . and they cannot be solved by politics. They can only be solved by people who are deeply spiritual. We must pray that we can all learn to understand one another better."

At the time my husband reported this chance encounter, I happened to be entertaining the prospect

of becoming FiP's managing director. In the words of his Pakistani friend, I heard the clarion call to mission. Jaspal is one of the many diverse people in this world, ordinary people like you and me, who are seeking ways to reverence human and divine in all its incarnations, thereby forging a pathway to peace.

In reflecting on my own life's journey to date, I am awed and humbled at where I have been and grateful for the rich blessings of having followed different paths. I have embraced the vowed life in the context of a religious community. I am now a wife and a mother. I have pursued graduate degrees in religion and psychology. I have served as an educator, therapist, spiritual director, and social worker. For the last twelve years, I have contributed my talents and skills as part of the senior management team for a non-profit child welfare agency. This brings us to the "here and now" . . . to a path that is wide open before us, limited only by the confines of our collective imagination.

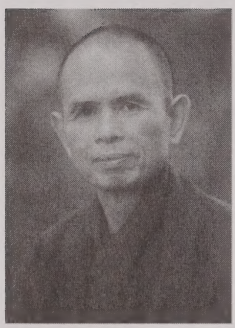
The world today is no less in need of leadership from Fellowship in Prayer than it was at our founding fifty-seven years ago. The issues that divide us and the potential for destruction are no less intense. Joseph Campbell, a scholar, writer, teacher and the world's foremost authority on mythology, believed there is, "a point of wisdom beyond the conflicts of illusion and truth by which lives can be put back together again. Finding it is the prime question of the time." As we companion each other on the journey in search of this wisdom, it is my hope and prayer that we will, as Campbell has said, "reveal the radiance of our own discovery," drawing others into the deeper unity and peace for which all humankind is longing.

Sara Wuthnow

OUR FEATURE

Peace Begins Here: The Right Time for a Picnic

Thich Nhat Hanh



"In Plum Village, we try to do things differently. We don't discuss strategies of peace. We practice bringing peace into ourselves. Then, in a small circle, we look at each other and recognize each other as human beings with a lot of suffering. It is possible to see that our true enemies are hate, fear, despair, and especially wrong perceptions. Human beings are not our enemies."

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

Thich Nhat Hanh is a world-renowned writer, poet, scholar, Zen Master, and peacemaker. He was born in Vietnam in 1926 and joined the monkhood at the age of 16. In Saigon in the 1960s, he founded the School of Youth for Social Services (SYSS), a grass-roots relief organization that rebuilt bombed villages, set up schools and medical centers, resettled homeless families, and organized agricultural cooperatives. The SYSS based its work on the Buddhist principles of non-violence and compassionate action. Martin Luther King, Jr. nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. The following year Nhat Hanh

led the Paris Peace Talks' Buddhist delegation and urged world leaders to use nonviolence as a tool to end the Vietnam War.

Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings and practices appeal to people of all faiths. His mission is to translate Buddhist teachings into everyday language that all can understand. He founded Plum Village, a monastic community and retreat center in France, as well as retreat centers in Vermont and California. He is the author of more than 100 books translated into many languages, including Being Peace, Peace is Every Step, *and* Touching Peace. *He leads retreats worldwide on the art of mindful living. For more information see www.plumvillage.org.*

The Right Time for a Picnic

Once there was a teacher who lived with his students in a temple. One day, a student asked, "Dear teacher, can we arrange to have a picnic?" The teacher said, "Yes, we will find a day when we can have a picnic." Yet they were so busy, they never found even one day. A year passed, then two, then three, and still they hadn't had a picnic. One day, while walking together in the city, they saw a funeral procession. The teacher asked his student, "What is that?" And the student said, "They are going on a picnic. The only picnic they have is when they die."

I have lived through two wars in Vietnam, and I know what war is—you don't know whether you will be alive this afternoon or this evening. There is fear, anger, and despair. If you don't know how to manage these things, you cannot survive. That is why our practice is to have a picnic right here, right now, and not wait. Is it possible for Israelis and Palestinians to have a picnic and for everyone to enjoy every moment of it? I think so.

The picnic can be happening right now in this very moment. A bomb may explode today, but still we will have our picnic. We are all sitting here together. We have nothing to do. We just enjoy sitting, with no worries, because sitting is a pleasure. Listening to someone speaking is also a pleasure. You don't need to learn anything, pass an exam, or get a diploma. You just sit and enjoy breathing in and out, listening to someone speaking about peace. It is not my intention to give anyone ideas about peace; you already have plenty of ideas. Our intention is to be peace right in the here and the now.

Often our bodies are not at peace. We can learn how to bring peace into our body right in the here and the now. Our body suffers, especially during times of war. We feel tension, stress, and pressure. We have worked our body too hard and it is full of conflicts. The way we handle our bodies makes them suffer so much that we have no real peace. To bring peace into our bodies, we allow them to rest and have a chance to renew and heal themselves. We can do it today. Even after one or two hours, we will feel much better. We are not just talking about peace in our body, we are actually bringing peace into it.

We all have feelings of sadness, pain, or excitement. Our feelings flow through us like a river and often overwhelm us. Being together with friends who know how to handle their feelings and emotions, we can learn how to handle ours as well. Within fifteen minutes of breathing and being mindful, we can begin to know how to handle our fear, despair, and anger; this is very important. If you cannot handle your body and your feelings of anger, fear, and despair, you cannot talk about peace. Handling them well will bring peace and harmony into your body, feelings, and emotions.

When we are overwhelmed, we do not perceive things as they are; we have wrong perceptions about who we are, who others are, and what the world is like. These wrong perceptions are the foundation of all our actions that bring unhappiness, destruction, fear, and anger. We need to be able to handle our perceptions, so we know whether our perception is wrong or correct. Most of our suffering comes from our wrong perceptions. We should take the time to look deeply into the nature of our perceptions so we are not caught by them, because our perceptions are the foundation of all our feelings, emotions, and afflictions.

In daily life we are seldom free of our feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. We are rarely truly ourselves. Often we are victims of our feelings and perceptions; we are like a leaf floating on the ocean, with the waves pushing it to and fro. We don't have sovereignty over our situation. That is why it is so important to come home to ourselves. In this way, we cease to be dominated by our circumstances. This is the basic practice of peace. If we have some peace in our body, our emotions, and our perceptions, then we can help another person to have peace. But we have to begin with ourselves. You cannot be an instrument of peace if you have no peace within yourself. When you become an instrument of peace, you become an instrument of God, of Allah, of the Buddha, and of ultimate reality. This is not too difficult. We can do it.

Finding Refuge

Sometimes we feel very tired, we have no more energy, and we want to give up—our situation is so difficult. We feel like we cannot do anything. We want to seek a place where we can be protected and take refuge in God, in the Buddha, or in Allah. Imagine a wave that is very tired of

rising and falling, up and down, and would like to seek refuge. There is a refuge for the wave, and that is the water. If the wave recognizes that she is water and seeks refuge in the water, she is no longer afraid of rising and falling. It is very important that she knows she is water, and that she doesn't have to seek water outside of herself.

Maybe you are a wave, and you are so tired of rising and falling, of being born and dying. You are looking for something solid, safe, and long-lasting in which to take refuge. If you are a wave, you don't have to look for the water. You are the water in the here and the now. God does not exist outside of us. The ultimate, our refuge, is not outside us, it is right here inside us. "I rest in God" means "I take refuge in the ultimate." We can call the ultimate Buddhahood, God, or Allah; it is all the same thing.

When you rest in God, you don't have to run; you just go home to yourself like the wave in the water. If the wave continues to search, she will never find the water. The only way to find the water is to go home to herself. When she realizes that she is water, she has peace. She practices resting in God in the here and the now. Although she continues to rise and fall, she is peaceful. We can practice this: God, not as an objective separate entity, but God as the ground of our being.

Many of us are caught in taking refuge in a notion. We think we are taking refuge in the Buddha, but we are only taking refuge in our notion of the Buddha; we think that we are taking refuge in Allah, but Allah is just a notion we have in our head. That is why we want to take refuge in the present moment, in our in-breath, our out-breath, our steps. These are much more concrete ways of taking refuge. Breathing in, I take refuge in my in-breath, I am entirely my in-breath. I trust my in-breath, and together

with my in-breath, I become peace. Breathing out, I take refuge in my out-breath, I become my out-breath. I trust my out-breath and I become peace with my out-breath.

I Have Arrived

"I have arrived" is our practice in Plum Village. When you breathe in, you take refuge in your in-breath, and you say, "I have arrived." When you make a step, you take refuge in your step, and you say, "I have arrived." This is not a statement to yourself or another person. "I have arrived" means I have stopped running, I have arrived in the present moment, because only the present moment contains life. When I breathe in and take refuge in my in-breath, I touch life deeply. When I take a step and I take refuge entirely in my step, I also touch life deeply, and by doing so I stop running. Stopping running is a very important practice. We have been running all our life. We believe that peace, happiness, and success are present in some other place and time. We don't know that everything—peace, happiness, and stability—should be looked for in the here and the now. This is the address of life—the intersection of here and now.

There are seeds of peace and joy within us. If we know how to take refuge in our in-breath, in our step, then we can touch our seeds of peace and joy and allow them to manifest for our enjoyment. Instead of taking refuge in an abstract notion of God, Buddha, or Allah, we take refuge in the reality of the ultimate. God can be touched in our in-breath and our step. Many of us have succeeded in doing this. We enjoy living deeply every moment of our daily life, through the practice of touching the ultimate—touching joy and peace in the here and the now.

This sounds easy, and everyone can do it, but it takes

some training. The practice of stopping is crucial. How do we stop? We stop by means of our in-breath, our out-breath, and our steps. That is why our basic practice is mindful breathing and mindful walking. If you master these practices, then you can practice mindful eating, mindful drinking, mindful cooking, and mindful driving, and you are always at peace. We should not be like the teacher and his students who were always running until they saw a funeral and realized that this was the final picnic. We have to enjoy our picnic right here and right now. We have the means to do it. If you think that it is very difficult to make an in-breath or a step in mindfulness, you are wrong. They are highly enjoyable. You can touch peace just by breathing in or making a step. You touch the seed of peace inside you and remove the tension and conflict in your body, your feelings, and your perceptions.

Our practice is the practice of mindfulness—mindfulness of breathing, walking, eating, dishwashing, and cooking—always dwelling in the here and the now and not allowing ourselves to be pulled away by worries, projects for the future, or regrets about the past. We have to reclaim our freedom, because we have lost it. We are caught by our past and our worries about the future. We don't have the capacity to be here and now in order to touch life. That is why it is very important to learn the art of being peace in the here and the now.

I enjoy walking in the kingdom of God every day. It is something you can do right now—it is not something to hope for. Why should I deprive myself of that joy? It is very healing and nourishing. My friends can do this, too, if they really want to. If all you want in life is a diploma or a large salary, that may take time, but if you want to enjoy

walking in the kingdom of God, you can do it now—as long as you are able to go home to the present moment.

. . . And if you feel that you are home, then you don't need to run any more, and your practice is successful. If you still feel that you need to run, then you have not arrived, you are not home yet. Your home is not only in the Middle East, Holland, England, or America, your home is here—here means life. All the wonders of life are available in the here and the now, and it brings you a lot of joy, peace, and happiness.

Peace and joy should be possible in every moment. Please try. . .You are always in the kingdom of God—don't leave it. The passport to enter into the kingdom of God is mindfulness and concentration. Keep this passport with you and you will be able to stay in the kingdom and not have to leave. Enjoy your picnic.

Helping Each Other Be Human: A Palestinian Reflects on Mindfulness

"I have some experience with mixed groups of Palestinians and Israelis, but my time in Plum Village was unique. Something happened, quietly and with deep listening, that helped me to be in touch with each person's pain and suffering. I am concerned that the experience I had here will be like a dream that will fade away the minute I land at the Israeli airport and experience humiliation and disrespect again, after living for two weeks surrounded by people who are respectful and supportive of Palestinians. I would like to see us continuing what we have done here in Israel and expanding it. I learned two important things here: I learned to listen deeply without rejecting the other person and his or her point of view,

even if it was difficult for me to hear; and I learned how to share, especially difficult feelings and experiences, in a calm and respectful way, so that the other person would want to listen. We were not trying to find solutions, but rather understanding and support."

Building a Space Inside of Us: An Israeli Finds a Space to Dream

"To me, the possibility of Jews and Arabs living in peace, sharing one territory, one country, as equals, without feeling threatened, seemed a very distant dream. But, during our time together I felt it was not a dream. In the here and the now there was a reality we, Arabs and Jews, shared. I felt, in that moment, that we could be together as human beings, beyond religious and national definitions. I felt how deeply the practice has changed every one of us; how practicing deep listening, talking from the heart, walking mindfully, eating mindfully, and smiling mindfully together has opened my heart to my own confusion and suffering and to the others' confusion and suffering, and also to our joy. We could sit together and be a container for our pain and anger. For me, the practice is building a space inside of us in which we can handle whatever comes up, without fighting with each other, without arguing, just being open to our own pain and to the others' pain."

Beginning Anew

At Plum Village we practice a ceremony of Beginning Anew every week. Everyone sits in a circle with a vase of fresh flowers in the center, and we follow our breathing as we wait for the facilitator to begin. The ceremony has three parts: flower watering, expressing regrets, and

expressing hurts and difficulties. This practice can prevent feelings of hurt from building up over the weeks and helps make the situation safe for everyone in the community.

We begin with flower watering. When someone is ready to speak, she joins her palms and the others join their palms to show that she has the right to speak. Then she stands, walks slowly to the flower, takes the vase in her hands, and returns to her seat. When she speaks, her words reflect the freshness and beauty of the flower that is in her hand. During flower watering, each speaker acknowledges the wholesome, wonderful qualities of the others. It is not flattery, we always speak the truth. Everyone has some strong points that can be seen with awareness. No one can interrupt the person holding the flower. She is allowed as much time as she needs, and everyone else practices deep listening. When she has finished speaking, she stands up and slowly returns the vase to the center of the room.

We should not underestimate the first step of flower watering. When we can sincerely recognize the beautiful qualities of other people, it is very difficult to hold on to our feelings of anger and resentment. We will naturally soften and our perspective will become wider and more inclusive of the whole reality. When we are no longer caught in misperceptions, irritation, and judgment, we can easily find the way to reconcile ourselves with others in our community or family. The essence of this practice is to restore love and understanding between members of the community. The form that the practice takes needs to be appropriate to the situation and people involved. It is always helpful to consult with others who have more experience in the practice and have gone through similar difficulties in order to benefit from their experiences.

In the second part of the ceremony, we express regrets for anything we have done to hurt others. It does not take more than one thoughtless phrase to hurt someone. The ceremony of Beginning Anew is an opportunity for us to recall some regret from earlier in the week and undo it. In the third part of the ceremony, we express ways in which others have hurt us. Loving speech is crucial. We want to heal the community, not harm it. We speak frankly, but we do not want to be destructive. Listening meditation is an important part of the practice. When we sit among a circle of friends who are all practicing deep listening, our speech becomes more beautiful and more constructive. We never blame or argue.

In the final part of the ceremony, compassionate listening is crucial. We listen to another's hurts and difficulties with the willingness to relieve the suffering of the other person, not to judge or argue with her. We listen with all our attention. Even if we hear something that is not true, we continue to listen deeply so the other person can express her pain and release the tensions within herself. If we reply to her or correct her, the practice will not bear fruit. We just listen. If we need to tell the other person that her perception was not correct, we can do that a few days later, privately and calmly. Then at the next Beginning Anew session, she may be the person who rectifies the error and we will not have to say anything. We close the ceremony with a song or by holding hands with everyone in the circle and breathing for a minute. Sometimes we end with hugging meditation.

Reprinted from Peace Begins Here: Palestinians and Israelis Listening to Each Other *(2004) by Thich Nhat Hanh with permission of Parallax Press, Berkeley, California, www.parallax.org.*

William Walsh

ILLUMINATIONS

We travel together, passengers on a little spaceship, dependent on its vulnerable reserves of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and the love we give our fragile craft, and each other.

~ *Adlai E. Stevenson*

Nonviolence is not a garment to be put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our being.

~ *Mahatma Gandhi*

When you carry out acts of kindness you get a wonderful feeling inside. It is as though something inside your body responds and says, yes, this is how I ought to feel.

~ *Harold Kushner*

Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry, and give back.

~ *Dag Hammarskjöld*

When you find peace within yourself, you become the kind of person who can live at peace with others.

~ *Peace Pilgrim*

It may be that Allah will bring about friendship between you and those you hold to be your enemies.

~ *Qur'an 60:7*

When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.

~ *Audre Lorde*

We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.

~ *Marcel Proust*

If you could get rid of yourself just once, the secret of secrets would open to you. The face of the unknown, hidden beyond the universe, would appear on the mirror of your perception.

~ *Rumi*

I expect to pass through life but once. If, therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do for any fellow being, let me do it now, as I shall not pass this way again.

~ *William Penn*

Mankind must remember that peace is not God's gift to his creatures; peace is our gift to each other.

~ *Elie Wiesel*

There are many ways up the mountain, but each of us must choose a practice that feels true to his own heart. It is not necessary for you to evaluate the practices chosen by others. Remember, the practices themselves are only vehicles for you to develop awareness, lovingkindness, and compassion on the path toward freedom.

~ *Jack Kornfield*

Sixty Years Later

Roland S. Larson

Sometimes we are offered a once-in-a-lifetime experience to forgive another human being who has hurt us deeply. I had my chance in 1962. Could I meet the challenge? I doubted it.

On August 14, 1945, the war in the Pacific suddenly came to its conclusion, signaling the chance for many of us to return home soon. We had just finished the grueling Okinawa Campaign and were preparing to invade Japan in November. We were told there would probably be enormous American casualties.

In some ways I felt like a casualty already, emotionally.

The war's end meant I would finally be released from the stranglehold of my boss, Rear Admiral Brown (not his real name). Together with many of my shipmates, I watched Admiral Brown become the most despised person we had ever known. Though highly competent in military operations and tactics, the Admiral was known for his glaring incapacity to relate to any of us, his fellow officers. His leadership was through fear,

Roland Larson is a retired counseling psychologist in Minnesota. He and his wife Doris are authors of four books, and they have conducted over 800 seminars and workshops worldwide in communications and values education.

intimidation, criticism, and punishment. The result for him was total isolation.

We were a small ship, 158 feet long—half the size of a football field and home away from home for seventy men. We sailed the Atlantic and Pacific in this "bobbing cork" twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with no end in sight.

I was Admiral Brown's twenty-three-year-old flag secretary, his right-hand man in administering the operations of thirty-six gunboats under his command. Inexperienced and eager to do my part, I was a green Ensign, feeling inadequate and scared going into combat.

And now, sixty years later at our Flotilla reunions, Brown's legendary status continues. Many survivors continue to share with me their own personal, ugly anecdotes—some true and accurate, some perhaps stretched a bit by over-ripening in one's memory. But each story helped define Mr. Brown as a much-feared, uniquely colorful person who contributed huge doses of anxiety, tension, and disequilibrium to those around him. Certainly that was true for me, his staff aide, during those many long months before and during the Okinawa Campaign. Month after month I experienced his "dark side" in ways that left their scars within me for decades after I left his command.

I know now that most of us have a dark side, too. It shows up in myriad ways as a part of one's own individuality. I have learned that it is easier to see the shadow self in another person than in myself.

What I came to experience after the war was that Brown also had a positive, generous, and giving side to his complex personality. I discovered it almost by accident in 1959. That summer I had a graduate

fellowship at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. One evening, just out of curiosity, I searched the phone book and found the telephone number of Rear Admiral Brown, retired.

Did I really want to reconnect? My initial reaction was "No way!" But later that evening, I took a risk and called. Brown answered the phone! Upon hearing who it was, he said with considerable surprise and delight, "Larson, you're the first person from my flotilla who has ever contacted me in these fourteen years. May I take you to lunch tomorrow?"

The next day two civilians had a stressful but delightful lunch together. No uniforms. No wartime communication barriers. No hurried tasks to accomplish. No typhoon. No kamikaze attacks. No authority gaps. No power plays to obstruct our conversation. I was stunned. Here were two human beings simply enjoying one another.

Mr. Brown extended his generosity by inviting my family to spend a weekend at his gorgeous estate in the beautiful horse country of Northern Virginia. When we arrived, the estate manager met us and offered us full use of the very large house. All of our needs were met: food, drinks, swimming pool, etc. We were overwhelmed with the surprise gift we were given

Several years later, in the 1960s, my wife and I attended a national conference in Washington. Again, we were invited to the Virginia mansion for an elegant, unforgettable Palm Sunday luncheon with Mr. and Mrs. Brown and two of their friends.

I discovered that a miracle had occurred within me. Without Mr. Brown ever knowing it, I had completely forgiven him in my own heart. I had embraced my own

hurt and pain and had let go of it—forever! What a miracle for me and what a relief!

Each Christmas, beginning in 1959, Mr. Brown and I faithfully wrote to each other. About twenty-five years ago, my joyous Christmas letter was returned unopened. It was marked "deceased."

I know now that if I hadn't made that phone call in 1959, I would be foolishly carrying a load of seriously unresolved feelings still today. I will forever be grateful for the miraculous experience of reconciliation that took place within me, enabling me to come to peace with my deep feelings of bottled-up frustration, hurt, hostility, and anger.

I rejoice now, knowing that the dark side of life experiences can be defeated by a spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness—all within one's own heart, and through one personal decision.

POETRY

The Prayer Place

wilma gayle waddell

In the midst of the
dirt and concrete
there is a
lush green place

In the midst of the
anger and noise
there is a
peaceful silent place

In the midst of the
worry and pain
there is a
serene sane place

I go there often
to rest
to renew
to return
to the one who made me
joyful
loving
whole

Wilma Gayle Waddell is a counselor and a poet. She is a former poetry editor for Coffey Talk Quarterly, *and is currently a contributing writer for* Kentucky Families Today *magazine. She lives with her husband, Phillip Jones, in Somerset, Kentucky.*

Snow

Sister Francis Assisi Kennedy, OSF

Like grace, the freshly falling snow
Surrounds,
Flits,
And flirts

In the dark night
Casting light

In the Bright day
Brilliant beams

Still
And steady

Like love,
It mounts up
Renews
Beautifies

Hides the trash
Slows the tread
Causes all to pause

And wonder at the white
Wonder soft and
Child's wonder-quiet world.

See Sister Francis Assisi Kennedy's bio on page 34 of this issue.

Willing

Ruth McKay

I come to you
one hand holding desire
one hand holding contentment
leaning toward a touching of palms.
If we touch our hands together
the lines will not change in appearance,
but the warmth
may melt the frozen stream
that ribbons between us.

Ruth McKay is a medical family therapist in Syracuse, NY, working in a hospital setting with children diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses and their families. Poetry has long been a way for her to explore and express the emotional and spiritual experiences of her personal and professional life.

Christmas Present

Donald Koozer

The snowy town square is decorated
With festive lights and evergreen trees.
Store fronts light up the misty night
And Salvation Army ladies
Ring their bells at passing shoppers.
I hold my warm coat snugly around me.
There is this one moment;
All over the world;
This everlasting present
Moving across the deep universe.
Christmas shoppers rush around me.
They clutch at the night
As if fearing
They will miss the season.

Donald Koozer, born and raised in Oklahoma, recently retired and now pursues his life-long passions for writing, meditation, and a deeper relationship to the Infinite. He lives in Arizona with his wife, author Donis Casey.

Candle

Clare Lynch

The candle and I go back to the dark ages.

As far back as Cavan in the 1970s when the ESB men were shimmying up the poles outside our rural house in thunderstorms. It seemed to be such a bankable part of my growing years that the power would fail at least once every year before Christmas. On the wettest night, the bleakest, during thunderstorms usually.

The Lynch family would be gathered together in insular pockets of disharmony throughout the Lynch household.

I would be sitting at my end of the dinner table engulfed in accountancy books balancing my acts. My mother would have her index and second finger bored into her cheek as she sat in her armchair next to the purple unflowering plant whose name we never knew. She would be reading the *Sacred Heart Messenger* or a library book based on the life of some worthy historical figure, her lips silently mouthing the written words. My father, a commanding bulky figure, would be reclining in his armchair with his feet up on a stool in front of him, his mind ticking over and revolving furiously around the

Clare Lynch lives and writes in County Sligo, Ireland, where she has won two national awards for her writing. "Candle" is excerpted from Short Steps in Long Grass. *Lynch is currently working on a second collection of writings. "Candle" was also published in* Desert Call *magazine, Winter 2006. Clare spent last summer in Nada Monastery, Crestone, CO. She hopes that one day she can regard her writing and any message it conveys as "a big aspect of lived-out spirituality."*

current prices of cattle in Ballyjamesduff mart.

And the thunkedy thunkedy thunk overhead indicated that my brother was listening to his Madonna tapes, the Irish Top 30 or something else equally thunkedy thunkedy. The TV in the corner of the living room was on, broadcasting an episode of Columbo to nobody in particular.

Then the power would fail.

Just like that. With what I can only emptily describe as an audible silence.

Dysfunctional Lynch family became immediately even more dysfunctional. And somehow the darkness that engulfed me became embarrassing. It was a void needing to be filled. My father, never a man short on words no matter what the occasion, would break the silence, fill the void, sever the darkness.

"Holy Jasus!" he'd say. "Christ! Didn't I effin' know that'd happen tonight."

My mother, more pragmatic, much more the practical problem-solver in our house would then say, "There's candles in the press above the sugar."

And there always were.

Candles in the press above the sugar. And somehow, with the fumbling for and lighting of matches came a Lynchian unity. Stranger still, it seemed as if the light those candles shed was to me a false Christmas, yet for all that falsity it was somehow more real than the real one.

My brother would by this time have come sloping down the stairs, his Madonna silenced for one night. My mother would calmly put a paint chart sample in the pages of her book to mark it for the next day. The task of placing those glowing candle stalks on appropriate sites around the kitchen was always left to me. It was as if I were decorating our living space with warm emotion. As a

family we would sit within the warm nest of flame, our giant shadows buck-leaping protectively behind us. Somehow my father would soften his thought from the practicality of everyday things like whether it was a good time or a bad time to sell the bullocks in the hill field and whether he'd be able to get J.P. Donnelly with the bulldozer to clean the drain at the lower farm. His mind instead would wander, in the manner of a straight-backed man on a meandering bicycle, back to days of his boyhood: hiring out with a neighboring Protestant family, seeing his first ghost, packing his bags for England in the late 1940s, America in the 50s. . .

I've never felt such a sense of love for my father as I did on nights like those when he shared his simple and humorous story with us.

Who could've thought there'd be such magic in darkness? Not me certainly, as I'd make the tea on these rare nights in our house—the evenings that in candlelight glowed with animated conversation. Even the big iron kettle spitting contributed its conversational tuppenceworth.

It would seem as if there was a reluctance to break up the family gathering on the power cut nights. We all knew that things would be back to normal in the morning so my father, first always to go to bed, would shuffle his heavy stockinged feet towards the hallway and issue us his final broadcast: "Goodnight."

But for once, in unison all three of us would lift our heads to respectfully acknowledge his commanding silhouette and indeed for once in unison we'd all chorus, "Goodnight" back to him.

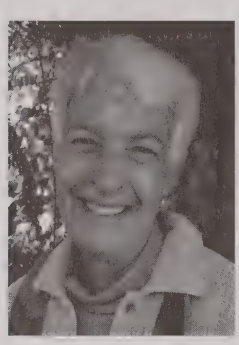
But the difference was, on this night we meant it, in every shape of the word.

It really had been a good night.

Anne Cornwall

A Treetop Angel

Elizabeth B. Gricus



My Sunday morning walk to the Wickford Beach and its nearby neighborhood had become a weekly ritual. This day was no different, and then again, as I rounded a corner, I was greeted with a sight beyond words. There, atop a thirty-foot evergreen tree with the shape of a pyramid, stood an adult white egret. Seemingly without effort, the egret stood straight up at the very pinnacle of the tree. I could see its unwavering legs in a balanced pose as if there were only one leg. The sheer magnitude of this vision filled me with awe, and I stood there for some time in an effort to truly appreciate what I was seeing. My only wish was that everyone flying by in their vehicles or on bikes would take notice of this treetop angel and feel the blessing.

I resumed my walk and, after at least fifteen minutes, my curiosity got the better of me. I had come to the same juncture of streets to exit this area and I returned to find the egret still perched on the treetop.

Elizabeth Gricus is a spiritual director living in Wickford, Rhode Island. She also has an MSW from Boston College. Her religious heritage is Catholicism; her spiritual view is global and inclusive. In recent years she has been a volunteer with Home and Hospice care of Rhode Island. Her current areas of exploration include the healing arts, prayer, metaphysics, and everyday spirituality.

It was unbelievable. Oh, to have such graceful poise and stamina!

Over the years, as I have wandered the various Wickford waterways, I have been gifted with the sight of egrets standing on the tree branches as they awaited the shifting tides. In each instance, a smile of delight would come to me, as if I were seeing an angel in the tree.

My response never stops there. What invariably follows is a personal invitation into that deeper awareness about what I perceive as the egret's qualities of quiet stillness, patient trust, determination, perfect balance, focused attention, peacefulness and more. I ponder how those same qualities apply to me, for I do believe that we are always being divinely guided. Nature is a magnificent conduit for meeting myself and I often need repeated lessons. The mystery is that I just never know how, when, or where that guidance will appear.

PRAYERS

Winter Prayer

Sister Francis Assisi Kennedy, OSF

When the sun shines
And the birds sing
Then, Lord, my trust is great.
Increase it, please, my God
On the dark silent frozen days.

Sikh Prayer For Peace

God judges us according to our deeds,
not the coat that we wear.
That truth is above everything,
but higher still is truthful living.
Know that we attaineth God when we loveth,
and only victory endures in consequences
of which no one is defeated.

Sister Francis Assisi Kennedy, OSF, is an archivist for the Sisters of St. Francis in Oldenburg, Indiana. She has taught English in high school and college. She celebrated her Golden Jubiliee last year, and is writing a popular history of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis.

Kristin Keegan is a poet and teacher living in northern California. Her poetry has appeared in The South Dakota Review, Women: A Journal of Liberation, *and* Earth's Daughters.

Prayer from a Wintry Overlook

Kristin Keegan

Let there always be
winter sunsets
ribbons of crimson on the frosted river
rabbit-fur hills and spidery treetops
clouds like the starched aprons of angels

and let there always be
black birds against the pewter sky
ghosting chimneys
steeples
rooftops like dark open books
laid face-down on doilies
of snow-threaded lace

and let the train's bold cry
startle again
beneath me in this staid enduring town
as daylight dwindles
and dusk come worn and muted
as an ancient dream

and let my heart always
hold this vision
of the day I stood here
saying goodbye
while at the same time
breathing it all afresh
and greeting it all anew.

Gray Skies and Golden Domes

Jasmine Appleberry

I walked across a bitter landscape, dodging the tangles of mud, ice, and metal that appeared before me unpredictably. Pulling my jacket collar in tighter, reaching for the security of my earmuffs, I felt the sting on my cheeks of an unrelenting wind. As strangers passed by me in determined masses, I checked to confirm that my fanny pack remained cradled in the belly of my down coat, protected yet available.

All around me gray images prevailed: sturdy geometric buildings of unadorned concrete; salt-and-pepper clouds in the sky; ashen expressions composed of frustration, exhaustion, and struggling hope. I had a long journey ahead to buy my daily bread, a privilege in that it was easily obtained with only a few bills and a short wait in the open market. As a foreigner, I could skip the regular store lines.

The scene: Moscow, fall, 1992. I was a college student on a semester abroad, widening my horizons much more than I had ever bargained for. In my few months there, I had learned new forms of resilience, surprising even

Jasmine Appleberry is a Unitarian Universalist who works as a clinical social worker in Providence, Rhode Island. She believes her life to be far more fulfilling today because of the spiritual questions raised by her Russian adventure.

myself with my ability to adapt—not including, of course, the first few days of despair, and the long nights spent wide-awake, looking out at the skyline that I imagined as either a scene from a post-apocalyptic movie or as Harlem in the brunt of January.

During my days, I found the bare essentials of food that I needed, and more. I gained a fondness for imported Swedish spreads and authentic Italian pasta, much as I missed my accustomed treats of shopping bags, spaghetti sauce, vegetables, and driving to the supermarket. I completed my errands with ferocity and perseverance: a kind of gritty refusal to succumb to the environment completely.

I filled my time, learning about Kansas from my American roommates, sharpening my skills at cards, and adjusting to cold showers and cockroaches. I tried not to think about the cozy, in-home "immersion" experience of which I had dreamed. I tried not to think too much at all, but it was unavoidable while pressed between other weary travelers on a packed subway, while struggling to find places not on the map, and while wishing for clean public restrooms.

How did an entire empire, or at least an entire city, continue everyday with so little color, so few comforts, such sparing moments of hope? I struggled to answer that question as I spoke with my professors whose faces sagged as they described ever-increasing inflation. I thought of this puzzle as I navigated public areas without a smile in sight. I wrestled with it as people hinted, in glimpses of bare honesty, that they feared they could not feed their families.

I saw the answer when I entered real homes. While so many Russians had learned to show no public

vulnerabilities in the Soviet regime, and had learned to fight for their basic living needs out of necessity, their hearts shone to me in tiny rooms with pieces of nostalgia and culture all around them, as they fed me plate after plate of homemade food. No force—not communism, not economic hardship, not a country spinning into chaos—could take away their bonds with one another, or their faith.

They held on to their stories, their values, their traditions, and their children. In my limited and cherished visits to Russian homes, I encountered such openness, such warmth, and such giving that I realized what mattered in my own life, both in Russia and back in Rhode Island: to relish the everyday, to hold on to loved ones, and to savor present wonders.

When I showed my Russian friends a photo of my parents' house, or discussed driving a car, or tried to describe a banana, I came to realize all that I had taken for granted. My habitual concerns—grades, appearance, popularity, and material successes—all withered away before the sustaining spirit I saw.

They did not live in constant joy. Their lives were filled with daily challenges of heartbreaking proportions. But their affection, hope, and spirituality persisted, even as these were frequently tested. These intangible treasures were great secrets which I never would have seen had I remained in museums and in my foreign dormitory. They were unexpected gifts.

Often, just around the corner in this city of bleak skylines, there lay a stunning, golden, onion-domed church: centuries-old, irrepressible, beautiful, and glowing. These churches highlighted my somber marches through the city like splinters of fire. Their supernatural

glow illuminated, insulated, and inspired a population. With their limited resources, my Russian friends banked on love, saved their history, and welcomed me.

When I walked into the New York City airport on my return home from this semester abroad, I felt dizzy from the blinding, unreal colors of the commercial world. For months, I could not go into a store without feeling overwhelmed by all the options.

I experienced my circumstances with new awareness of my own wealth and blessings, as I savored my mother's apple crisp and New England's rural pastures. For the first time, I recognized my assets, among them: support systems, choices, a great guiding force, and ready satisfaction of basic needs. My view of the material world had changed irreversibly. I still wanted "stuff" but I knew that I had started on a new search to make my life as meaningful and rich as in the tiny sanctuaries of a few Russian homes.

It took me years to absorb the teachings of those three-and-a-half months. In many ways, I still am. I still wish for a better car, for a garage in the winter, and for a seductive sense of security. I am, after all, an American. I have grown up with promises of dreams fulfilled, and I have chased my society's goals for years.

But my life has meaning now, beyond job, grades, clothes, or others' perceptions. I am connected to a religious community. More than that, I am connected to a flame that makes my whole life a beautiful place as never before, everyday. I light a candle at my Unitarian Universalist church, and I think of candles lit across the globe in the same resilient faith, though we may use different words to describe it. I am connected to my true self and to the world. I try to build these connections

more and more. I notice my blessings, and I notice love.

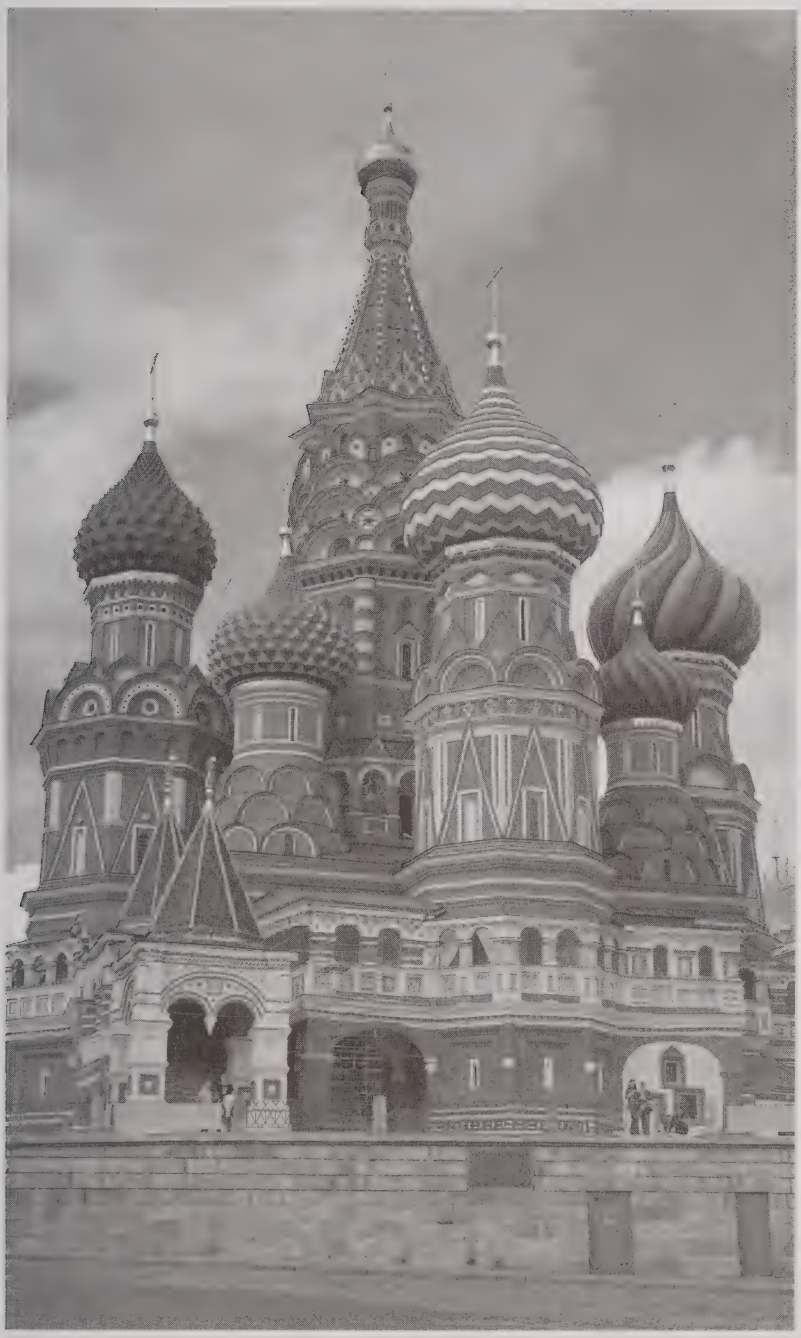
When I find myself plodding through the hazardous terrain of the New England winter, I know this is exactly where I want to be, just as the dirty ice of the Moscow sidewalks was exactly where I had to be fourteen years ago. I needed to see the material manifestations of gloom all around me to realize that it is manageable. I needed to see the unconquerable love within the homes of a few loving families, and the heavenly domes of a few hidden churches, to see that meaning is not in what you carry, concealed in your fanny pack, but in the love of other people, and in the love of the Creator who always brings new surprises around the corner.

Sparks of light shine more brightly in a darker forest. With all the gifts I have received, I have built the fire of my own faith into a warming, transcendent light that reminds me of what is truly important when all else is taken away. I am thankful for the transformative experience of that semester, and for the years of healing, growing, and contemplation that have followed.

I had walked into that foreign land knowing only American overabundance, but I was the one who had needed to receive from the wisdom and caring of a few impoverished people.

Now that many of my former priorities have been cast aside, I can finally savor each day for the bounty of universal truths and spiritual love around me. I can finally, and genuinely, give to others.

As I think back on golden domes and glowing smiles, I can see a fire not only in myself but in everyone around me—even in the iciest and most overcast of circumstances. That flame, known by many names, sustains me.



Moscow, Russia

BOOK REVIEWS

Please enjoy these publishers' reviews of books that have recently come across our desk.

BECOMING FIRE: Spiritual Writing From Rising Generations
Edited by Alexander Levering Kern
Andover Newton Publications, 2006
Phone: 800-964-2687; Web site: www.ants.edu

Becoming Fire is the first anthology to highlight in diverse genres a range of spiritual voices from "rising generations" (Generations X and Y, millenials, and the Hip Hop generation) alongside selected work from older mentors. Together these authors plumb the depths of religious experience, scripture, and tradition to articulate powerful insights into young adult faith and the universal search for God, self, vocation, and transcendence in a broken world.

Through story and metaphor, the forty-eight authors gathered here address great themes in the spiritual life: prayer and desire, covenant and grace, creativity and calling, identity and freedom. Many of these writers speak passionately to the critical issues of our times: war in Iraq and Afghanistan, AIDS, globalization and consumption, racism and homelessness, and conflicts over human sexuality and spiritual authority. Still others tackle the urgent tasks of re-imagining theology, spiritual practice, writing, and

worship for the twenty-first century. *Becoming Fire* maps the landscape of postmodern spirituality and charts exciting directions for emergent faith and prophetic witness.

> Like the desert ascetics and countless others before them, many young adults embrace the narratives and practices of ancient faiths. Among rising generations today there is growing interest in the role that narrative plays in shaping faith and creativity. At the same time, many are exploring classic spiritual disciplines such as contemplative prayer, meditation, Sabbath keeping, and lectio divina (sacred reading)—or fashioning new practices and narratives through popular culture and cyberspace. Interestingly, spiritual writing has become one powerful way to situate contemporary stories of faith within the wider narrative arc of God's presence and work in human history *(from the Introduction).*

Alexander Levering Kern is an educator involved in ecumenical, interfaith, and Quaker peace and justice efforts. His work appears in publications such as *Georgetown Review, Hazmat Review, Caribbean Writer, Ruah, Friends Journal, Spare Change News,* SACRED JOURNEY, and anthologies from Ibbetson Street and St. Anthony Messenger Press. He serves on staff and adjunct faculty at Andover Newton Theological School, the oldest independent graduate seminary in the United States, where he directs the Faith Youth Institute.

GANDHI'S HOPE:
Learning From Other Religions as a Path to Peace
by Jay McDaniel
Orbis Books, 2005
Phone: 914-941-7636 Ext. 2576 or 2477
Web site: www.maryknoll.org

Motivated by a lecture at Hendrix College given by Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, Arun Gandhi, Hendrix professor Jay McDaniel wrote *Gandhi's Hope* to help readers learn about world religions as a way to find both personal and world peace.

"Whether we are Christians or Jews, Muslims or Hindus, Buddhists or Sikhs, we face five serious challenges," says McDaniel. "These challenges are to live compassionately, to live self-critically, to live simply, to live ecologically and to welcome religious diversity." McDaniel offers a reading of world religions that emphasizes not that the truth is one while the paths are many, but that the truths are many and make the world richer. At a deeper level, he asks how we are to understand and deal with the religions, as they present themselves today so ambiguously—both as paths toward, and obstacles standing in the way of, peace. Placing the world's religions in the context of the search for personal, global, and cosmic peace, McDaniel gives reasons to believe that Gandhi's hope for a different kind of future is possible.

Jay McDaniel is professor of religion at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas. He is the author of many books and articles at the intersection of Christian and Buddhist studies, theology of religion, ecology and religion, and spirituality, including *Living at the Center.*

PEACE PRAYERS From the World's Faiths
by Roger Grainger
O Books, 2006 (an imprint of John Hunt Publishing Ltd.)
Phone: 800-462-6420; Web site: www.o-books.net

Religions contribute to wars, but they can also contribute to peace. They are its necessary foundation. Here, eight different religions join together in peace to pray for peace. Under the auspices of the interfaith organization, The Week of Prayer for World Peace, they bring home vividly the love that is God and the horror that is war. It is not only inner peace—tranquillity of soul and mind—which is being sought here, but an end to agony and bloodshed, physical and psychological torture, abuse of every kind taking place in the world of men, women, and children.

This is a very practical prayer book, earthed in the pain of being human. Peace itself comes in many different forms, and the book is arranged to be flexible and comprehensive, ideal for individual or group use. It consists of seven weeks of prayer, each of which contains eight "days" of prayers and intercessions on particular themes connected with the overall theme of "Peace on earth and goodwill towards mankind".

Roger Grainger is a parish minister who holds a Doctorate in Divinity from London University. He is known for his books on Christian liturgy and rites of passage, and as the organizer of Week of Prayer for World Peace and the editor of their publications. He is the author of *The Beckoning Bible* (Methodist Publishing House), *Group Spirituality* (Brunner Routledge), *Response and Responsibility* (Epworth Press) and many other publications. He lives in Wakefield, England.

WISDOM IN THE TELLING:
Finding Inspiration and Grace in Traditional Folktales and Myths Retold
by Lorraine Hartin-Gelardi
Skylight Paths Publishing, November 2006
Phone: 800-962-4544; Web site: www.skylightpaths.com

How can traditional folktales and myths inspire us on our spiritual journey? What can their underlying messages of spiritual transformation teach us about ourselves and our own power and potential?

Wisdom in the Telling is a collection of stories that reveal the universal experience of the human heart, reminding us that we are not alone. Each story teaches us about ourselves in its own way, providing us with lessons learned through the fantastic and the everyday. These tales of transformation contain jewels of wisdom about compassion, prayer, hospitality, creativity, truth, remaining true to your dreams, and more.

Drawn from many cultures and faith traditions—including Irish, Scottish, English, European, Asian, Indian, and Middle Eastern—each retelling illustrates the healing and powerful connection that stretches across the globe and unites us all in an embrace of wisdom through words. You will see your own struggles and successes mirrored in the lives of the characters contained in these pages. As you travel through their stories you will hear a gentle voice urging you to tap into your own endless power and potential.

Lorraine Hartin-Gelardi teaches workshops on the art of storytelling, performs in a vaariety of venues nationwide, and is cofounder of the Dutchess Interfaith Story Circle.

WELL LIVED: Stories of Wisdom and Wonder
by Bridget Haase, O.S.U., June 2006
Phone: 617-825-3905, ext. 298
Web site: www.wisdomwonder.com

There is a Chinese maxim loosely translated, "Keep a green tree in your heart and tend it gently so that birds will come warble in its branches." This became the seed that has sprouted into *Well Lived*.

In her latest book, Sister Bridget Haase shares her personal encounters with twelve ordinary people from as far away as Africa, as isolated as the hollows of West Virginia, and as near as her family and her religious community. As songbirds in the tree of her life, they chanted the wisdom and wonder of lives well lived.

Whether she's accepting a possum Thanksgiving dinner; praying with the pastor of a serpent-handling church; watching a young mother dig water holes in the desert of Sudan; living in the darkness of her father's suicide; or accompanying her mother on her Alzheimer's journey, Sister Haase powerfully reveals the Divine Presence seeping through ordinary lives. With compassion, tenderness, and deep gratitude, she recounts stories of illness, famine, beauty, joy, and faith that became, for her, God-bearing and life-sharing.

Sister Bridget, a member of the Ursuline Nuns in Dedham, Massachusetts, has ministered in Appalachia, Mexico, and Africa. She presently serves as spirituality coordinator at The Boston Home, a long-term care facility for people with multiple sclerosis and chronic degenerative neurological diseases. She is the co-author of *ENKINDLED: Holy Spirit, Holy Gifts* and author of *WELL SAID: Children's Words of Wisdom.*

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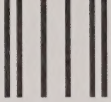

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